Poetry translation

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The nature of poetic text makes it challenging to translate, which has stimulated much debate about how these challenges should be tackled. This entry describes these issues, plus the skills, working processes and professional conditions involved in translating poetry.

Features and functions of poetry

Like any genre, poetry may be characterized in terms of textual features and communicative function. In textual-feature terms, poetry typically communicates meaning not only through surface semantics, but also by using out-of-the-ordinary language, non-literal imagery, resonance and suggestion to give fresh, "defamiliarized" perception and convey more than propositional content; among its specific techniques are linguistic patterning (e.g. rhyme or alliteration), word association, wordplay, ambiguity, and/or reactivating an idiom's literal meanings (see e.g. Shklovsky 1917, Jakobson 1960, in Lodge 1988: 15-29, 32-61). These may combine in 'conventional forms' – the 14-line fixed-metre, rhymed sonnet, say, or the classical Chinese lüshi with fixed syllable-counts and parallelism. Other genres may also use such features (e.g. rhyme in advertisements), and some poems may use few of them; however, the denser or more prominent their use, the more 'poem-like' a text will seem.

The communicative function of poetry is rarely informative or persuasive, but rather to entertain or to give heightened emotional or intellectual experience. Though usually written, sound's centrality to poetry often gives it an oral performance element (henceforward, therefore, 'readers' also implies 'listeners').

Source-target relationships

This textual complexity, which often exploits the resources of one specific language (that moon and June rhyme in English, say), makes poetry challenging to translate. Scholars, most of them also translators, have long debated the implications of this for source-target text relationships, as outlined below. These debates sometimes have prescriptive aspects, revealing how poetry-translation and general-literary norms can stimulate and constrain translating decisions.

Firstly, three classes of source-target relationship have been identified (Boase-Beier 2009: 194):

- 'Literals' or 'prose renderings' recreate source semantics but delete source poetic features. These often aim to help readers understand source poems published alongside them, or give raw material for co-translators to reshape into receptor-language poems. They are sometimes advocated in their own right: this entails believing that the "perfect essence" of a poem lies in its semantics and imagery (Dacier 1699, Goethe 1811-1814, in Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006: 161-165, 199-120).
- Conversely, 'adaptations', 'versions' or 'imitations' (cf. Dryden 1680, in Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006: 145-146) change or abandon key aspects of

source-poem semantics, and sometimes its poetic features, for the sake of target-poem effectiveness. Their producers may claim explicitly that these are not translations, in order that they be judged as receptor-language poems without reference to other-language sources.

- What might be called 'recreative translations' try to recreate a source poem's semantic and poetic features in a viable receptor-language poem – perhaps the most challenging option. Most recent Western poetry translation seems recreative in intent, apparently reflecting a wider ethic that translations should have "relevant similarity" to their source, whilst performing a receptor-language function – in this case, being a poem (Jones 2011: 202, citing Chesterman).

Most published discussions focus on recreative translation. One debate asks whether translators should try to replicate source-poem semantics and poetics, or should be free to recreate them more loosely (cf. Dryden's 'metaphrase' versus 'paraphrase', 1680, in Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006: 145-146). The former, though aptly characterized as "like dancing on ropes with fettered legs" (Dryden ibid.), probably dominates recent European practice (Jones 2011: 141). Advocating the latter implies believing that target-poem quality is crucial, and that translators should therefore 'play' creatively with source-poem structures rather than try to replicate or explicitate them (Folkart 2007: 430; Bassnett 1998: 65).

In a parallel debate echoing Venuti's foreignization-domestication opposition, some advocate retaining source-culture-specific poetic features in translation, although this risks deterring potential readers (e.g. Newman 1856, in Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006: 225-226). Others advocate replacing them with "counterparts" or "matchings" which resemble source features in function rather than form (Holmes 1988: 54), although this risks deleting what is "characteristic of the original" (Newman ibid.; cf. Cowper 1791, in Weissbort and Eysteinsson: 185; Bassnett 1998: 64).

Using formal patterning, especially rhyme, in target poems can shift semantics relative to the source. In receptor literary cultures where free verse (poetry using no rhyme or rhythm) dominates, some advocate abandoning rhyme because they feel that such shifts "falsify" or "destroy the poem's integrity" (Bly 1983: 44-45; Lefevere 1975: 56-59); literary norms (rhyme as 'old-fashioned', say) and the practical difficulty of finding rhymes may also be factors. Others advocate recreating formal patterns, because they see them as crucial to the source poem's effect. The risks and merits of recreating formal metre are less often debated – perhaps because they are less likely to cause semantic shifts (unless coupled with rhyme: Jones 2011: 170).

Holmes identifies three approaches to recreating formal patterns (1988: 25-27):

- 'Mimetic': reproducing the original form. This does not guarantee reproducing its effect: French source readers would see hexameters (six-beat lines) as a 'basic' poetic line, for example, whereas English target readers, more used to five-beat pentameters, might perceive them as 'heavy'.
- 'Analogical': using a functionally similar target form (e.g. replacing French hexameters with English pentameters).
- 'Organic': using a form which the translator judges appropriate for the content – for instance, replacing Chinese five-syllable lines (e.g. Li Po's 举头望明月) with English iambic pentameters (e.g. I raise my head and see the shining moon).

These debates often have an ethical note: 'loyalty' to the source poet versus 'responsibility' for creating a poetically valid target poem, for instance. The difficulty of reconciling the latter two imperatives has generated two contrasting discourses.

Discourses of loss are negative, seeing poetry translation as "betraying" source meaning to keep poetic effects (Lefevere 1975: 56) or vice versa (as in Robert Frost's reputed remark that "poetry is the first thing lost in translation"). Discourses of creativity are positive, arguing that these imperatives can be reconciled if translators are loyal not to the source poem's surface features, but to their interpretation of its 'spirit' or 'intent'.

Translator expertise and translating processes

Translating poems within these constraints and opportunities requires multiple skills. Translators need to be expert source-poem readers and expert target-poem writers (Bassnett 1998; Folkart 2007). They also need cross-language expertise, to find appropriate counterparts for complexes of source-poem features – and when this proves impossible, the literary judgement to decide what to reproduce, what to recreate more loosely, and what to abandon. A long tradition of translators' self-reports, supplemented recently by real-time 'think-aloud' studies, describe how this expertise is put into (largely recreative) action (e.g. Weissbort 1989; Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006; Jones 2011). Key details are summarized below.

Recreative translators produce several successive target-text 'versions', over several drafting sessions interspersed with 'time in the drawer', until one version feels adequate. They typically start by pre-reading and analysing the source poem; after this, reading the source alongside the emerging target poem usually merges with (re)writing into a single process. The first version is often semantically literal. This is rewritten in later versions to incorporate poetic features (associative meanings, sound-patterns, etc.). However, when recreating formal patterning (a rhyme scheme, for instance), some translators tackle this in the first version, and develop a full semantic structure later. Early versions are usually handwritten, probably because this retains alternative solutions, notes, etc. that may be useful later; later, word-processing allows translators to assess their versions as receptor-language poems.

Translators spend most time tackling lexis and imagery. Lexis is central, because many poetic and stylistic effects (e.g. associative meanings or emotional nuance) require analysis of source-poem and proposed target-poem wording. Work on imagery, i.e. underlying text-world meaning, supports this. Here, translators typically try to deduce the source poet's intent (from the poem, via scholarly analyses, and/or by asking the poet), but their target-poem decisions are also influenced by their reading of the source poem itself, and their wish to construct a semantically and poetically coherent target poem. Sound, even in formally-patterned translations, is important, but takes less translating time.

Variations in preferred approach between translators, and hence between different translators' renditions of the same poem, reflect the debates described earlier. Translators have different "hierarchies of correspondence" – whether semantics or sound, for example, should be prioritized (Holmes 1988: 86). They may also show different degrees of creativity (Jones 2011: 140-142). When literal equivalents seem ineffective, most translators consider adapting meanings within the source semantic field, but fewer consider moving outside it: translating Dutch poet Gerrit Kouwenaar's de kleine kou van het najaar ('the small cold of the autumn') as the slight autumn chill and autumn hinted at winter respectively, for example.

Professional aspects of poetry translating

Poetry translators' wider working conditions share many features with other literary producers, like poets or anthology editors. Poetry translators have higher working autonomy and visibility (translators' names appearing on book covers, for instance) than translators in other genres. Translator expertise is vouchsafed via approval of translations by source poets, editors, and publishers rather than via formal qualifications. Poetry translating's intrinsic challenges and high quality demands mean that words-per-hour output is low. As poetry is usually published in small print-runs or on free-to-view websites, however, its translators – unless subsidized – rarely earn a living wage. Hence they usually work part-time and voluntarily, motivated by the desire to convey works to new readers, often coupled with the enjoyment of translating. Poetry translators are often also involved in wider text-production processes: choosing poems for a selection of a source poet's work, for instance; writing a critical commentary about the source poet, poems and cultural background, and often explaining their own translation approach; or giving public readings with the source poet. Moreover, poetry translators' decisions may be explicitly assessed by critics – whether or not the latter can read the source language.

Poetry translators typically originate from one of two backgrounds: foreign-language 'linguists' with a poetry specialism, or published target-language 'poets' with an interest in translation. Published translations, especially from less widely read languages, often involve two co-translators pooling their expertise: for instance,: a source-language-native linguist and a target-language-native poet (though the latter may get more public recognition – Csokits, Hughes, in Weissbort 1989). Even 'solo' translators typically rely on others: source-language informants, target-draft readers, etc. (Bly 1983: 42-43). Source poets are among the most valued informants; sometimes, however, they may insist that source and target semantics match closely, giving translators little room for creative reshaping.

Translating poetry, therefore, is a complex task, with high expertise demands and few financial rewards. As with other areas of literary production, however, its intrinsic enjoyment and cultural value make it a task worth doing.

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